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Second Thoughts

Until last week there were about as many Russians as Americans inside the United States Embassy in Moscow. Soviet employees mopped the floors, shoveled the snow and ran the embassy's fleet of cars and buses. In the snack bar, a favorite gathering place for American visitors and residents of Moscow, a hatchet-faced woman named Tanya presided at the counter, shouting orders to the cook: "Pavel! Chissboorger, frrentch frriess!"

The relatively comfortable life of the U.S. Embassy suddenly fell apart when Washington and Moscow took turns expelling each other's diplomats for alleged spying. As the supply of diplomats dwindled, the Russians cleverly hit the Americans where they lived, withdrawing all of the Soviet citizens who work for the embassy. "Char Wars" (as the British might call it) typified the increasingly sour aftermath of the Reykjavik summit. While they expelled each other's diplomats, the United States and the Soviet Union spun their wheels on arms control and argued bitterly about who had agreed to what in Iceland.

"Besides distorting the entire picture of the Reykjavik negotiations," complained Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, "the United States took actions in the last few days that look simply wild in the normal human view, after such an important meeting between the two leaders."

Both sides seemed to be practicing revisionism. Near the end of the Reykjavik meeting, Reagan and Gorbachev ad-libbed their way into an agreement on eliminating all nuclear weapons within 10 years, according to an account furnished immediately afterward by White House chief of staff Donald Regan (NEWSWEEK, Oct. 27). The understanding was "never firmed up," Regan added, and the summit soon broke down when President Reagan refused to accept severe limitations on the defensive program known as Star Wars. Eventually the administration began to focus on the fact that complete nuclear disarmament would leave the West badly outgunned by Soviet conventional forces and by nuclear weapons in other countries. With Congress and the allies asking anxious questions, the administration denied that Reagan had agreed to give up all nuclear weapons.

A White House statement issued last week said the president had suggested eliminating "offensive ballistic missiles" only. The administration maintained that he and Gorbachev had discussed complete nuclear disarmament, but only as one of Reagan's long-term goals. Gorbachev added more confusion to the debate. In a televised speech, he claimed that Reagan had consented to the elimination of "all nuclear weapons." But a few moments later he said the agreement covered only "all . . . strategic offensive arms."

This week Rep. Les Aspin, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, will hold hearings in an attempt to find out what was agreed on at Reykjavik. Amid all the confusion, the administration has not been able to draw up complete instructions for its negotiators at the Geneva arms talks concerning strategic weapons and Star Wars. The superpowers also are far apart on the issue of nuclear testing. And although Washington hopes to work out a separate deal on intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe and Asia, an item on which the Soviets have offered significant concessions, Gorbachev said last week that INF had to be part of a package deal on all nuclear arms, including Star Wars. "No package, no concessions," he said.

Last week's expulsions began on Sunday, when the Kremlin booted out five American diplomats in retaliation for last month's U.S. order that forced 25 accused spies to leave the Soviet Mission to the United Nations in New York. In Washington, the administration's top cops, Attorney General Edwin Meese and CIA Director William Casey, argued that the United States could crack down on more Soviet spies, even as it pursued arms-control agreements with Moscow. Secretary of State George Shultz disagreed, but on Tuesday the administration expelled four officials from the Soviet Embassy in Washington and one from the consulate in San Francisco. It also ordered 50 other members of the embassy and consulate staff to leave the country in order to establish "strict equality in numbers" with the 251 U.S. diplomats and staffers in the Soviet Union.

A day later Moscow expelled five more Americans and withdrew all 260 Soviet citizens who worked for the U.S. Embassy and the consulate in Leningrad. Some administration hard-liners wanted to respond by kicking out five more Soviet diplomats. But soon the State Department discreetly waved a white flag. Spokesman Charles Redman announced that "parity and reciprocity" had been established and that it was time to "build on the progress made in the discussions at Reykjavik."

U.S. officials insisted that the tit-for-tat expulsions did more good than harm. "We've finally gutted their intelligence capability in this country," boasted a White House aide. It appeared that U.S. intelligence had relatively little to lose from Soviet retaliation; its operation in Moscow was devastated by the defection last year of former CIA agent Edward Lee Howard. The Soviets had a lot more to lose. "Espionage activity at the Soviet missions went beyond anything imaginable," said Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, who sponsored a law enacted last year requiring eventual parity in the size of U.S. and Soviet embassies. "It's far easier for Soviet intelligence operatives to carry out their missions in our open society than it is for Americans in their closed society. They lose more when the numbers are cut than we do."

'We'll manage': Intelligence experts admitted, however, that Soviet snooping in the United States would not be shut down. "In the short term, they lose," said one U.S. official. "In the long term, they may get [back] to where they are now. The intelligence function will go on." Meanwhile, normal work had to be skimped at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow as harried staffers filled in for their own servants. Setting a good example, Ambassador Arthur Hartman made do without his Soviet chauffeur, and his wife, Donna, helped prepare a lunch for official visitors, including Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Peace Prize winner. "We'll manage," said one upbeat official. "We always do." Another wasn't so sanguine, asking: "Who's going to shovel the snow? Who's going to unload the trucks? Who's going to pick up packages at customs? They tell us it can be done. But no, it can't."

Eventually, the U.S. Embassy will become more like its Soviet counterpart in Washington, which imports almost all of its workers, even for the most menial jobs. For starters, the State Department plans to hire about 30 Americans to work as plumbers, electricians, mechanics and other service personnel, assuming it can find any who want to live in Moscow. Under the self-imposed parity rule, the new service workers will have to occupy slots now filled by diplomats—or CIA agents. According to a U.S. official, 99 of the 251 embassy positions are filled by State Department personnel and about 55 by the Pentagon's military attaches and Marine guards. Of the remaining 100 or so positions, Washington sources say the majority (as Moscow must know) are held by the CIA. Some of those spies may have to come in from the cold—to wash the dishes or mop the floor.

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